

Epilogue — Paper Cuts and Aftertaste

The official debrief happened in a room that tried very hard to look like it didn't exist.

No windows. No clocks. No art. A table that had the personality of a surgical tray. Even the air felt filtered—scrubbed of humor, scrubbed of humanity, scrubbed of anything you might remember later.

Mai sat with her back straight, hands folded, face neutral.

Ace sat beside her like a quiet threat with good posture.

Shammy drifted behind them, half-leaning on the wall, looking bored in the way storms look bored when they're choosing not to drown a city.

Bright, naturally, wore sunglasses indoors like reality owed him a favor.

Across the table sat an O5 liaison. Not an O5—those didn't do "rooms"—but close enough that their words landed like stamps.

The liaison slid a folder forward.

"Termination confirmed," they said. "Asset neutralized. Distribution poisoned. Counter-metadata deployed. Infrastructure severed."

Mai said nothing. She didn't nod. She didn't smile. She let the facts stand on their own legs.

The liaison continued, eyes flicking down the page. "The phrase 'CITY SYSTEM TEST — FALSE ALERT' is now appearing in a statistically significant percentage of mirrors associated with the original upload. Engagement dropped sharply."

Bright's mouth twitched. "So the monster lost the algorithm war."

The liaison's expression didn't change. "We don't call it an algorithm."

Bright's smile sharpened. "You should. It would make it less sacred."

Mai cut in, flat. "Any confirmed secondary events after the decoy seed?"

The liaison paused. "One anomalous audio bleed reported in a radio band scan. No subsequent amplification. No confirmed copycat incidents."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "So it's not dead."

The liaison looked up. "Nothing like this ever is."

Ace spoke once, quiet. "Then what did we actually do?"

The liaison's gaze held steady. "You prevented a template from becoming a cult."

Badger's voice came through the speakerphone in the corner—Theta-24 had been routed in, because apparently even the Foundation understood you didn't keep Badger out of anything involving his own brand.

"So... we saved the internet by making it cringe."

There was a beat of silence.

The liaison didn't react.

Bright did.

Bright leaned back slightly and said, with complete sincerity, "Yes."

Badger sounded proud and offended at the same time. "Thank you. I will be putting that on a t-shirt."

Heavenly's voice immediately cut in on the same line. "No."

Badger: "Yes."

Heavenly: "No."

Badger: "Compromise. Hoodie."

Heavenly: "No."

Badger: "Fine. A hat."

Heavenly: "No."

Badger, wounded: "...a sticker."

Heavenly: "We'll talk."

Badger, triumphant: "We will."

Mai didn't smile, but Ace did—barely. A micro-expression, like a blade catching a sliver of light.

The liaison flipped a page.

"There is one more matter," they said. "Your conduct in the relay station."

Mai's eyes didn't change. "Be specific."

"Cutting a municipal backbone line with bolt cutters."

Mai: "It was an active vector."

The liaison: "It was city property."

Bright murmured, "So is the city. In practice."

Mai ignored him.

The liaison stared for a beat, then continued, controlled. "O5 acknowledges the necessity. You are not being reprimanded. You are being... reminded."

Mai's voice stayed cold. "Reminded of what."

The liaison hesitated—just once.

"That you were temporarily treated as O5 by hostile infrastructure," they said. "And that the psychological aftertaste of that can... persist."

Mai felt the words try to crawl under her skin.

She didn't let them.

"Noted," Mai said.

Bright leaned forward slightly. "If you're worried about aftertaste, then you should stop using the same bureaucratic channels the parasite used. It learned your habits because you feed it habits."

The liaison's gaze hardened. "Doctor Bright—"

Bright held up a hand. "I'm not being rude. I'm being accurate."

Mai watched the liaison weigh whether to argue with a man who never truly belonged to the room he was in.

Then the liaison slid one last sheet across the table.

A single line, stamped and signed.

O5 DIRECTIVE: TRIAD / THETA-24 COORDINATION STATUS — APPROVED (LIMITED).

Badger's voice went reverent through the speaker. "We're... approved?"

Heavenly sounded resigned. "Don't get excited."

Badger: "I'm already excited."

Heavenly: "Stop."

Badger: "Can we get matching jackets?"

Heavenly: "No."

Badger: "We could call ourselves 'Triad Crimes.'"

Grouse's voice cut in from somewhere, low and deadly. "Don't."

Badger: "Copy."

The liaison's tone remained professional. "Your cooperation proved effective. However—future deployments with Theta-24 will require explicit authorization."

Bright smiled thinly. "So basically: don't make this your hobby."

Shammy's eyes glittered. "It is my hobby."

Mai stood.

The meeting was over because Mai decided it was over.

"Send the final report to O5," Mai said. "We're done here."

The liaison nodded once. "You're done."

Bright rose as well, slipping the folder under his arm like it was a magazine.

Badger's voice added, in a tone that was strangely gentle for him, "Hey. Uh. Mai."

Mai paused at the door.

Badger hesitated—then said it anyway. "You did good. Like... scary-good. In a 'please never get promoted' kind of way."

Mai's mouth twitched once. Not a smile. A crack in the armor.

"Thanks," Mai said. "You were useful."

Badger inhaled like someone had just given him a medal. "I'M PUTTING THAT ON A SHIRT."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Badger: "SORRY."

—

Outside the facility, night air hit like a permission slip.

They walked in silence for a minute—boots on concrete, distant traffic, the city living its ignorant life.

Ace stayed close to Mai without needing to try. Shammy drifted on the outside edge, scanning, sniffing the world for the faint lie of a whisper.

Bright lit a cigarette he didn't really need.

Mai didn't ask how he had it.

She'd learned some questions were just invitations.

Ace spoke first.

"So," she said quietly. "Any more '05 clearance upgrades' in our future?"

Mai's eyes stayed forward. "No."

Ace: "That sounded like a wish, not a fact."

Mai's jaw tightened. "It's a fact if we enforce it."

Shammy murmured, amused. "We will."

Bright exhaled smoke, voice low. "For what it's worth... you didn't kneel."

Mai glanced at him.

Bright shrugged. "That was the point. It wanted obedience more than it wanted blood. You denied it the clean shot."

Mai said nothing.

Ace's hand brushed Mai's—anchor touch, casual now, intimate in the way they were intimate even in public.

"You did the thing you hate," Ace said. "You wore the mask."

Mai's voice was flat. "So I could break it."

Ace's eyes softened a fraction. "You broke it."

Shammy's gaze turned distant. "Not completely."

Mai stopped walking.

The others stopped with her, because when Mai stopped, you stopped.

"What," Mai said.

Shammy tilted her head.

"Nothing loud," she said. "Nothing commanding. But... a little thread. Like a hair in your mouth you can't stop feeling."

Bright's smile was thin. "Residual curiosity in the ambient population."

Badger's voice, faint through comms now—he'd been allowed back onto their line for transport coordination—added: "That is the grossest way you've ever described the internet."

Heavenly: "Mute him."

Badger: "Wait—"

Static. Silence. Heavenly, mercy-free.

Mai almost laughed.

Almost.

Shammy's eyes narrowed at the night.

"Someone out there," Shammy said, "heard 'Episode Six' and thought it was cool."

Ace's voice went cold. "Then someone out there will try to copy it."

Mai nodded once.

And she made it simple—clean, brutal, bureaucratic.

"Then we do what we did tonight," Mai said.

Bright glanced sideways. "Make it boring?"

Mai's gaze stayed hard.

“No,” Mai said. “We terminate the camera before it learns where the upload button is.”

Ace’s mouth twitched—this time, an actual tiny grin.

Shammy’s eyes flashed, pleased. “Good.”

Bright exhaled smoke and smiled like an old sin.

“Welcome to modern containment,” he said. “Where the monster isn’t in the basement.”

Mai looked at the streetlights.

At the cars.

At the radios.

At the people who would never know how close they’d come to being cast as extras.

“The monster,” Mai said quietly, “is in the part of people that wants to be chosen.”

Ace squeezed her hand once. “Then we choose each other harder.”

Mai didn’t answer with words.

She just squeezed back.

And somewhere far away—so faint it might have been imagination, so harmless it could have been nothing—the hiss of a radio band shifted for half a second.

Not a whisper.

Not even a word.

Just the suggestion that something, somewhere, still wanted an audience.

Mai didn’t look up.

She didn’t feed it.

She kept walking.

With Ace.

With Shammy.

With Bright and his cursed grin.

And even, somewhere behind them, with the faint echo of Badger’s voice—muted, blessedly—like the universe had decided that if it was going to flirt with horror, it could at least do it with company.

□ Täydellinen reaktio — ja täysin ansaittu.

Ace 21 se on. Ei spinoff, ei “välitarina”, vaan ihan oikea pääjatkumon lukko napsahti kiinni tässä:

Triad määritelty uudelleen suhteessa O5-tasoon

Brightin rooli terävöityi juuri oikealla tavalla

Theta-24 ankkuroidaan canonisesti ilman että he varastavat show'ta

Analog horror → infohazard → anti-myytti -ratkaisu on täysin Ace & Mai -henkinen

Tämä tuntuu juuri siltä vaiheelta sarjaa, jossa:

panokset eivät enää ole "mitä tapahtuu", vaan "mitä tästä jää ihmisiin".

Se on Ace-sarjan kypsä vaihe. Ja se näkyy.

Seuraavat luontevat jatko-optiot (ei pakko nyt, mutta liputan):

Ace 21: Director's Pass → kevyt jälkipyykki / fallout / pienet resonanssit

Ace 22 → täysin eri uhka, mutta Episode Six jättää pienen varjon

Tai väliin yksi Black File: joku copycat, joka epäonnistuu nolosti

Mutta nyt? Nauti hetkestä. Tämä oli puhdas osuma. ☐

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